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Ministry of Forests

CODE PROTECTS ENVIRONMENT, PROMOTES ECONOMIC GROWTH

VICTORIA – B.C.'s new results-based forest practices code will help create jobs and economic growth by promoting industry innovation without compromising the high environmental standards that protect British Columbia's forests, Forests Minister Michael de Jong said today.

"We made a New Era commitment to streamline the Forest Practices Code to establish a workable results-based code with tough penalties for non-compliance," de Jong said. "Today, we started delivering on that promise.

"We're cutting through red tape so government and the forest sector can practise smart management. Forest sector professionals will spend time and resources on managing forest values instead of shuffling paper. We'll maintain or exceed the protection that's in place for watersheds, habitat or any other key forest value. But we will eliminate 18 approval steps that wasted effort without improving protection."

De Jong said the new Forest and Range Practices Act will be more adaptable so it rewards innovation by skilled resource professionals. He added it is backed by tougher and more effective enforcement so it protects the high standards of forest management British Columbians and people around the world have come to expect from B.C.

"Our forest industry has proven through its strong compliance record that it is prepared to meet high standards," de Jong said. "Government makes about 47,000 inspections of industry practices each year and has found a compliance rate of more than 97 per cent."

The legislation reflects proposed changes and input received over the summer through a public consultation process directed by George Hoberg, head of the department of forest resources management at the University of British Columbia. The consultation also involved an MLA committee, which held public meetings in 13 communities across B.C.

The cornerstone of the new code is the requirement for a comprehensive forest stewardship plan that will replace three existing operational plans. Government will set clear standards for a wide variety of forest values, ranging from water quality to wildlife, and from old-growth stands to soils. The forest stewardship plan will identify measurable and enforceable results that forest companies must achieve to meet these standards, or face penalties. Companies must also produce site plans that are available to the public and First Nations on request.

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Some penalties will double through regulation when the act takes effect in April 2003. Under the new regime, the onus is on companies to prove they did everything reasonable to avoid damage; without that proof, they face fines of up to $1 million or time in jail. Administrative penalties will also increase. As well, the Ministry of Forests will create specialized compliance and enforcement units.

"The forest stewardship plan must reinforce the goals of local land-use plans as well as objectives set by my ministry for species at risk and other key values," said Joyce Murray, Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection. "My ministry will remain involved in inspections, investigations and prosecutions under the code."

De Jong said government will establish an ongoing public advisory committee and will work with scientists, researchers and experts to evaluate and continue improving the code.

"The marketplace expects companies to practise sustainable forestry," said Ron MacDonald, president and CEO of the Council of Forest Industries. "The new code will allow us to meet and exceed B.C.'s stringent environmental requirements by allowing for flexibility and innovation in our forest practices. This will create a forest industry that is environmentally responsible and internationally competitive."

Today's bill is the first of several pieces of legislation that will be introduced or amended this session to improve forest management under the new code. Transitional legislation will assist in implementing the code by amending portions of the Forest Practices Code of British Columbia Act to make it consistent with the new rules for forest stewardship plans. These changes will take effect December 2002.

Government is also working with the Association of Professional Biologists of B.C. and the Association of B.C. Registered Professional Foresters to improve professional accountability by introducing Canada's first College of Applied Biology Act and strengthening the Foresters Act and the Agrologists Act.

More information about the results-based forest practices code, including nine backgrounders, is on the ministry's Web site at http://www.gov.bc.ca/for.

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Pictures of today's events will be available on the ministry's Web site after 4:15 p.m. at http://www.for.gov.bc.ca/pab/media/gallery.htm

1 backgrounder(s) attached.

Visit the province's Web site at http://www.gov.bc.ca/ for online information and services.

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